

THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

Stockman's eyes

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois



I genuinely believe that for cow-calf producers to excel, they must embrace technology and adopt management

practices the scientific community has identified. Our understanding of nutrition, genetics, reproduction, growth and development, and carcass characteristics has grown exponentially in the past several decades. These advancements have helped position U.S. beef producers as the world leaders.

I could focus on many of these advancements, or “tools,” that are key for success. However, I may surprise you with what I believe to be an essential, and sometimes forgotten, “tool” — your eyes.

I challenge you to find a top-notch

operation that doesn't have a manager (or several people) with a keen ability to observe. This may seem simple to some, but I believe to others the art of observation may be getting lost in the shuffle. Your eyes can tell you so much about all aspects of the operation.

Let's start with health. I have been around people who can't tell if an animal is sick until it is nearly too late. I have also been around some I swear know an animal will get sick a day or two before the average person would ever pick up on it.

A retired manager of our campus

**TOOLS TO
YOUR EYES
SUCCEED**

beef farm possessed that very skill. He could walk through pens and pens of cattle and immediately identify any cattle that were off. How did he do this? He studied every animal from head to toe and observed their behavior. Sure, you have to know what you are looking for, but you also have to have the discipline to truly study the cattle.

Developing the skill

My kids have a few livestock projects in the barn at home, and it has been fun to watch their animal husbandry skills evolve. From checking for snotty noses, cough and lethargy to observing how aggressive they are at feeding time and if the consistency of stool has changed, the kids have started to

Sure, you have to know what you are looking for, but you also have to have the discipline to truly study the cattle.

notice some of those early signs of when an animal is “off.”

Being able to identify one or two sick animals early as opposed to not realizing there is a problem until half of your animals are sick can have significant ramifications on your bottom line.

Observe nutrition status

Similarly, managing your cow herd's nutritional status is very dependent on your observational skills. Effective rotational grazing management schemes rely on your

Continued on page 46

ability to determine the appropriate time to rotate cattle to a new pasture.

Often cattle producers can be focused on evaluating and studying the cattle and may not pay as much attention to the pasture as they should. Observing for areas of overgrazing or undergrazing, weed infiltration, or trampling can be very informative for future grazing management practices.

Body condition

Also, as I have discussed many times, observing and assessing your cows' body condition score (BCS) is a powerful tool for determining if nutrient requirements are being met. Cows in poor condition have likely been or are in a negative energy balance. Cows with a high BCS have probably experienced a period of time of positive energy balance.

Managing groups or even sorting individuals out of groups based on BCS is a well-documented beneficial management practice.

Evaluating individuals

Selecting future replacement heifers and determining which cows to cull from the herd, in my opinion, certainly requires visual appraisal. Selecting structurally correct females with good feet is fundamental to developing females that will have longevity in the herd.

As we have selected for more and more growth, there is no question we have strained the skeleton and foot structure has been overlooked.

Udder and teat quality are also extremely important as they contribute to labor at calving, longevity of cows and performance of calves.

Visual assessment of udder and teat quality should be done within 24 hours of calving. Taking a few minutes to visually evaluate udders at calving can alleviate headaches down the road (read more about udder scoring on page 86).

Certainly, other phenotypic traits that may be economically relevant in your operation require visual

Selecting structurally correct females with good feet is fundamental to developing females that will have longevity in the herd.

appraisal. Keen evaluators can see subtle differences in phenotype and then select for those traits they find desirable.

Eyeball the data

Finally, I challenge you to study data and records to identify trends and outliers. It is one thing to collect lots of data, but it is another to study it and "see" what it is "telling" you. Running averages is good, but studying the data and looking at the outliers, or both the top and bottom ends, can often tell you much more about the data. How do these data compare to last year?

What do you think the reason is that it is better or worse?

As a researcher, I get to look at lots of data. I also get to work with many students learning how to

study data. Just like some people have that natural ability to pick out the sick calf in a pen, some people have the ability to look

at a data set and immediately see correlations, trends and abnormalities.

If you are going to go through all of the trouble of collecting good data and records, you owe it to yourself to study it or find someone to study it with you.

I suspect there may not have been any new information presented in this column for many of you. Still, hopefully, this will remind us all that one of the most powerful tools we have is our eyes and the ability to observe and evaluate all aspects of our operation. |

Editor's note: "The Digestive Tract" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* focused on nutrition for the beef cattle life cycle. Dan Shike is associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois.